DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 557 CG 025 995

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TITLE The Role of the School Counselor.
INSTITUTION National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Berkeley, CA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Vocational and Adult Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 94
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM Office of Special Populations, 345 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth St., Champaign, IL 61820.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Office of Special Populations' Brief; v6 n1 Aug 94

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Career Exploration; *Career Guidance; Children; Counselor Role; Counselor Teacher Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; *School Counseling; *School Counselors; School Guidance; *Student Development; *Student Needs

ABSTRACT

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 emphasizes counselor involvement in improving the academic, career, and occupational opportunities of all students. This paper focuses on the problem of defining the role of the school counselor and provides a review of the literature in three areas: (1) student counselees and their needs; (2) the school counselor's role; and (3) how counselors can better assist the nation's increasingly diverse student population. Traditionally, the school's guidance program was considered an ancillary student service isolated from the instructional program. Today, there is general agreement that guidance program refers to a comprehensive, developmental program designed to benefit all students. Career guidance and counseling are now considered one component of a total career education program. Although more unified in purpose, counselors must now meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and must, therefore, restrain their own bias in their responsibility to all students. They must help students reach decisions without imposing their own views on student potential. To realize their goals, counselors must have clearly defined roles in the school; their added burden of auxiliary or administrative support functions must be eliminated. Given proper support, counselors can make a difference in students' lives. Contains 13 references. (RJM)

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NCRVE

National Center for Research in Vocational Education

University of California, Berkeley

Office of Special Populations'

BRIEF

Volume 6, Number 1

ED 379 557

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

by Esmeralda S.Cunanan and Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein

What do school counselors do? What should they be doing? Why are they criticized so frequently?

These and similar questions have challenged school counselors for some time. The recently passed School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) of 1994 emphasizes counselor involvement in improving the academic, career, and occupational opportunities of all students, thus offering educators an excellent opportunity to examine and strengthen the role of the school counselor. This BRIEF focuses on the problem of defining the role of the school counselor and provides a review of literature on (1) student counselees and their needs, (2) the school counselor's role, and (3) how counselors can better assist the nation's increasingly diverse student population.

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 gives educators opportunities to strengthen the role of counselors.

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The Problem

When schools fail to clearly define the counselor's role, school administrators, parents with special interests, teachers, or others may feel their agenda ought to be the guidance program's priority. The results often lead to confusion and criticisms when they are disappointed. Furthermore, the changing terminology concerning the guidance program exacerbates the situation. Traditionally, the guidance program was considered an ancillary student service isolated from the instructional program, and designed primarily to encourage students to attend college. Much of the counselor's work was reactive and crisis-oriented.

Today, there is general agreement that the **guidance program** or **guidance and counseling program** (used synonymously in the literature) refers to a comprehensive, developmental program designed to benefit *all students* in their journey through school and in preparation for the future. The program is designed to address the *developmental* needs of students appropriate to their age group (elementary, middle, secondary, or postsecondary). Forty states across the nation have adapted the comprehensive guidance and counseling program.

NOICC Guidelines describe processes of a career guidance program.

The National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee's (NOICC) *National Career Development Guidelines* (1989), lists the following *processes* of the career guidance and counseling program:

- **outreach**
- **counseling**
- **assessment**
- **instruction**
- **career information**
- **work experience**
- **consultation**
- **referral**
- **placement and follow-up**

It should be noted that *counseling* is one process of the guidance program and refers to the interaction between a *professional* counselor and an individual or a small group. The school counselor's *counseling* skills are well-defined techniques learned through professional education programs. As certified and/or licensed professionals, most school counselors hold an advanced degree in guidance and counseling or a related field. Ethically, school counselors *only counsel* students concerning normal development situations and refer students with psychological disorders to professionals with appropriate clinical training. Other facets of the guidance program, such as classroom instruction or providing information, are *key components of the guidance programs.*

Ethically, counselors must allow students to make their own decisions.

Adding to the school counselors' dilemma are perceptions that they place students in classes based on their personal biases. Professional school counselors examine their own biases and stereotypes and understand they are **ethically bound** to avoid restricting choices of students. *They are cognizant that students must be made responsible for* ***all*** *their decisions—including course selection, program selection, career goals, and future plans.* Obviously, students must be aware of and understand **all** their options if they are to make informed decisions.

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Definitions

Career guidance and counseling is one component of a total career education program.

Definitions of guidance and counseling terminology have changed. **Career development** is generally accepted as a lifelong process which incorporates general education, occupational training, and work as well as one's social and leisure life. **Career education** is the process designed to assist individuals in their career development. **Career guidance** is one component of a total career education program. According to the NOICC's *National Career Development Guidelines* (1989), a **career guidance program**:

- Is identifiable but integrated with other programs within the institution.
- Enhances the career development knowledge, skills, and abilities of all students by establishing program standards.
- Uses coordinated activities designed to support student achievement of the standards.
- Supports the delivery of the program through qualified leadership; diversified staffing; adequate facilities, materials and financial resources; and effective management.
- Is accountable with evaluation that is based on program effectiveness in supporting student achievement of the career guidance and counseling standards. (Local Handbook for High Schools, p. 1)

The Counselees

In schools today, counselors are required to work with all students regardless of cultural or ethnic background, sex, age, affectional orientation, special needs, class, and so forth making it imperative that counselors understand their students' needs. In a 1990 study, Nevo (1990) found student-counselees rated discussions with the counselor as more important than objective tests, interests inventories, or vocational information. Thus, it is critical that counselors understand and respond to the needs of the nation's increasingly diverse student population.

Students need to understand themselves to explore and plan a career.

According to the NOICC's *National Career Development Guidelines* (1989), students need assistance in (1) increasing self-knowledge, (2) educational and occupational exploration, and (3) lifelong career planning. Maddy-Bernstein (1994) adapted these elements in her preliminary framework for identifying exemplary career guidance and counseling programs by expanding the first group to include "self-advocacy" and the third group to include career preparation and transition. Gysbers (1988) lists the following career developmental needs of students:

1. **Students need improved and expanded opportunities to become aware of and develop their career (self) identity.** Many students are disadvantaged when it comes to opportunities for career development. They have inadequate sampling of work world models on which to base their emerging career identity. It is not that they don't have any, but those they have generally are inadequate. A lack of such opportunity, however, does not result in an occupational knowledge and value vacuum. Opinions are formed, judgments are made, and many times these result in premature educational and occupational foreclosure. An opportunity unknown is not an opportunity at all.
2. **Students need improved and expanded opportunities to conceptualize their emerging career identity through continuous and sequential career exploration activities.** Students need a chance to explore and test out some of their notions about the work world. Possible career options require continuous testing to help them evaluate what such options may mean to them. Students need opportunities to ask themselves the questions, "What do these options mean to me as I'm developing in my career identity?"
3. **Students need improved and expanded opportunities to generalize their emerging career identities through effective placement and follow-through adjustment activities.** They need help in translating their emerging career identities into reality. Students need the opportunity to continuously and systematically explore and test out from an internal frame of reference their personal attributes in relation to the wide range of educational and career opportunities that may be available to them. **It should be clearly understood that the primary goal is not to have students choose careers to fit jobs but rather to enlarge students' capacities and vision to make decisions about themselves and their career development in the context of the society in which they live, go to school, and work.** (p. 117)

Furthermore, the School-To-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 explicitly states the strong need for career education and career development programs for all students. For this to take place, they will need information sharing, outreach, communication, career education, labor market information, job placement,

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work experience programs, counseling and assessment, and public relations (Ettinger, Lambert, & Rudolf, 1994).

The Counselor's Role

Ambiguity about the role of counselors creates confusion.

School counselors have traditionally been expected to fulfill diverse—and often conflicting—roles. They have been called to act in the capacity of confidant, disciplinarian, consultant, scheduler, politician, administrator, and psychological helper. The ambiguity regarding counselor roles and expectations has created confusion among teachers, support staff, parents, and students, as well as stress for counselors. Ettinger et al. (1994) note that "in some schools, counselors are told to focus much of their time on record keeping, administrative responsibilities, or crisis interventions with students. There is little time for comprehensive career exploration and planning for life after graduation" (p. 25). In addition, facilities and resources for planning and implementing career guidance and counseling programs are sadly lacking. The high student-counselor ratios (e.g., 1:350) in most schools limit the services that school counselors can deliver. The following list of tasks is limited, yet, typical (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994):

- Counselors register and schedule all new students;
- Counselors are responsible for giving ability and achievement tests;
- Counselors teach classes when teachers are absent;
- Counselors send students home who are not appropriately dressed;
- Counselors assist with duties in the principal's office;
- Counselors compute grade-point averages and are in charge of student records; and
- Counselors are assigned lunchroom duty and supervise study halls.

For counselors to be effective, auxiliary or administrative support functions must be eliminated.

With the whole gamut of unrelated assignments of counselors, it is not surprising that various guidance needs of many students are not met. Few studies have explored what career counselors actually do or should do, at the elementary level (Carroll, 1993; Morse & Russell, 1988) and at the secondary level (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989) but counseling educators and researchers are in agreement—auxiliary or administrative support functions must be eliminated from the counselor's day-to-day activities if they are to be effective in fulfilling their role.

Responding to Diversity

Understandably, school reforms, workplace demands, and the changing economy and workforce demographics dictate new expectations for school counselors in the 1990's. Many believe that school counselors can be a key force in preparing the nation's diverse student population for the future. With the passage of the School-To-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, school counselors are being entrusted to take the lead in assisting our nation's young people to smoothly transition from school to work.

Counselors must meet the challenges of responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

As they comply with the STWOA's mandates, they must also meet the challenges of accommodating the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, including girls and women as well as the college-bound and the non-college-bound. They are called upon to provide leadership and facilitate schools' efforts to assist the career developmental needs of all their students. To enable them to meet the expectations of the student-counselees they serve and have an impact in educational reform, it is important they not be burdened with any non-career guidance duties (Hoyt, 1990).

There are several well-defined models available to educators who seek to revamp their guidance programs (Feller et al., 1992; Walz & Ellis, 1992). Walz and Ellis (1992) discuss three model career guidance and counseling programs—Gysbers' *Comprehensive Guidance Program Model*, Myricks' *Teacher Advisor Program Model*, and Purkey's *Invitational Learning for Counseling and Development*—proven to be effective in providing assistance to students with diverse needs. Each program has a solid conceptual foundation and has been field validated through extensive and successful use in school programs across the nation. Walz and Ellis (1992) also point out how the combined use of these programs can bring about a special guidance synergism.

Counselors can make a difference!

Much is expected from school counselors. The impact of counselors in the lives of students as reflected in the words of one of the counselees in Nevo's study (1990)—*The counselor helped me to deal with my personal problems, and even though these were not directly related to my vocational choice, they were still relevant to my choosing a career*—can be powerful.

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This publication was prepared pursuant to a grant from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, authorized by the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act.

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